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ABSTRACT

Responding to the need for empirical data regarding the exercise of parental control under current finance practices in public education, this study examined the extent to which parents select their children's schooling by locating the family residence with schools in mind and the extent to which parents maintain frequent and self-initiated contact with their children's teachers. Data were gathered from parent interviews and student reading achievement tests in 153 families with fifth-grade children. The families were stratified according to the expenditure per pupil and median family income of the districts in which they resided. Forty-three percent of the households chose residence without consideration of school, while 37 percent located because of their school's reputation and 20 percent because of specific school characteristics. Forty-seven percent of the households reported few contacts with teachers which were initiated and structured by the teacher; 53 percent reported larger numbers of contacts, most of which the parents had arranged around specific inquiries. The strongest predictor of both school selection and school contact variables was parents' educational attainment. (Author/JEH)

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Parental Control in Public Education: The Preferences
and Behaviors of Parents Related to Their Children's
Schooling*

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American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, April 1981.

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The Issue of Parental Control

Since the 1960s, attitudes toward public schooling have changed. A long standing loyalty to the ideology and institution of the "common school" is on the wane. Constituencies once unified in their support of public schools have become fragmented. And public education, traditionally viewed as a public good, is increasingly perceived as a consumer good to be purchased in the market.¹ In the past parents have tended to accept most of the decisions made by school board members and administrators and would appeal to or place pressure on persons who were politically accountable if problems arose. During the last decade, however, unequivocal acceptance of professional judgments has declined, and a general faith in the salutary prospects of political accountability has eroded.

To remedy the conditions which are thought to cause the growing unrest about public schooling, critics have advanced proposals to make schools more directly accountable to parents by creating markets in schooling which would allow for greater parental choice among school sites and programs and would enhance parental influence on educational policies and practices in the schools their children attend. Although advocates of greater parental control assume that levels of dissatisfaction with public schools are sufficiently high to warrant major reforms of school governance, our empirical base of knowledge concerning the varieties of preferences parents might pursue and the degrees of control differing groups of parents might exercise is so inadequate that most critics can only speculate on the likely outcomes of reform. This study of parents and children in today's public schools, which examines aspects of parental preferences, choices, and influence, can help us understand parental control in the present system and has implications for the schools of the future whether or not their governance becomes more highly decentralized and client-controlled.

¹See David B. Tyack, Michael W. Kirst, and Elizabeth Hansot, "Educational Reform: Retrospect and Prospect," Teachers College Record 81 (Spring 1980):253-55.

The Eroding Consensus

The growing issue of parental control is rooted in three conditions which have developed in the last decade or two. The first is a shift in public values away from social intervention to achieve equity and justice, through institutions such as the school, toward a resurgent pluralism, if not radical individualism which stresses libertarian interests.¹ The second condition is a frustration with public bureaucracies and the sense that public schools operate as monopolies impervious to the demands of their clients.² Proponents of alternatives to current patterns of finance and governance, such as voucher plans and tuition tax credits, argue that greater options for parental choice will meet the libertarian quest for individual determination and will render school officials more sensitive to parental interests because, in a market setting, an unresponsive administrator might lose business to competing schools. The third condition arises from the fiscal austerity of the times. Tax payers have refused to support rising expenditures in many public school districts, in part, because it has not been demonstrated that more dollars produce better outcomes. Advocates of parental choice argue that a competitive market in schooling would force schools to be more cost-conscious and efficient in their allocation of resources.³ It is interesting to note that the intellectual rationales for changes in the organization of schools in the United States revive many aspects of the classical economic debate over public and private funding for British education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁴

The State of Scholarship

Although the issues surrounding parental control of education have garnered considerable scholarly attention of late, much of the discussion has

¹William Greenbaum, "America in Search of a New Ideal: An Essay on the Rise of Pluralism," Harvard Educational Review 44 (August 1974):411-40.

²Jacob B. Michaelson, A Theory of Decision-Making in the Public Schools: A Public Choice Approach (Stanford: Institute for Research on the Finance and Governance of Education, School of Education, Stanford University, 1980).

³Tyll van Geel, "Parental Preferences and the Politics of Spending Public Educational Funds," Teachers College Record 79 (February 1978):339-63.

⁴See E.C. West, "Private vs. Public Education: A Classical Economic Dispute," Journal of Political Economy 72 (October 1964):465-75.

taken place in a void of empirical data on the nature and distribution of schooling preferences among different populations of parents and the means which parents may and do employ to influence their children's schooling, especially within the public system. Beyond the annual polls of public attitudes, which tend to aggregate parental preferences with those of a generally larger proportion of non-parents, and case studies of schooling expectations and satisfaction among parents in individual school districts,¹ we know little about parental preferences for curricula and instructional features in the classroom. Although we understand the relationship between residential location and school attendance boundaries, we have virtually no information concerning the extent to which parents select schools by deciding where the family will reside. And after a couple decades of attention to voting patterns and individual exertion of influence on school boards and central office administrators,² we have few assessments of the manner in which parents may attempt to monitor and affect the conditions in their children's classrooms through interactions with teachers.

Conceptual Framework for the Study

In this research I developed a conceptual framework for studying parental control in the public schools by drawing on theoretical formulations in social psychology and economics. The framework is based on two premises: (1) that parental control behavior depends on parental dispositions toward schooling in their children's lives; and (2) that parental dispositions are the product of parents' socioeconomic background and the academic abilities of their children. Each of the three components in this conceptual model has two elements; the background factors which are expected to predict parental dispositions are composed of characteristics of parents and children; the dispositional attributes of parents include both a general value which parents assign to schooling and parental preferences for particular features of schools

¹See, for example, Stanley M. Elam, A Decade of Gallup Polls of Attitudes toward Education, 1969-1978 (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 1978); and E. Jean Hills, "The Relationship between the Educational Expectations of Social Class Groups and the Role Expectations within the Public High School" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1961).

²See L. Harmon Zeigler and M. Kent Jennings, Governing American Schools: Political Interaction in Local School Districts (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1974).

and classrooms; and the control behavior of parents subsumes their efforts to select schooling according to some set of personal specifications and their exertion of influence on the provision of schooling in the schools and classrooms where their children are enrolled.

Social Psychological Concepts and Parental Control

The linkages among the three sets of factors outlined above are predicted, in part, because differences in socioeconomic characteristics among households may distinguish their psychological orientations toward future time and toward a sense of personal efficacy in the decisions and actions they take. The work of Davis, Havighurst, Schneider, and Lysgaard, among others, suggests that socioeconomic position may determine parental predispositions toward "impulse-following" versus deferred gratification.¹ According to findings which are common in the "time-horizon" literature, parents in lower-class groups tend to exhibit "... relative readiness to engage in physical violence, free sexual expression, ... minimum pursuit of education, low aspiration levels, ... and short time dependence. ..." while middle-class parents tend to feel that they "should save, postpone, and renounce a variety of gratifications."² Differences in future-time orientations may affect parental dispositions and behavior related to their children's schooling in the following manner. Parents of higher socioeconomic status who are future-oriented may assign a higher value to their children's future schooling than parents of lower socioeconomic status; such parents may also involve themselves more often in selecting schools and interacting with teachers on the assumption that such activities will increase the likelihood of their children's future educational success.

A second conceptual development in social psychology--Kohn's work on social class and personal efficacy³--suggests that parental social class

¹Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, "Social Class and Color Differences in Child-Rearing," American Sociological Review 11 (December 1946):698-710; Louis Schneider and Sverre Lysgaard, "The Deferred Gratification Patterns: A Preliminary Study," American Sociological Review 18 (April 1953):147-49.

²Sverre Lysgaard, "Social Stratification and the Deferred Pattern," Proceedings, World Congress of Sociology, Liege, International Sociological Association, 1953, p. 142 (author's emphasis).

³Melvin L. Kohn, Class and Conformity: A Study in Values, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

background may relate to parental preferences for characteristics of their children's instruction as well as parental control behavior. Kohn postulated that higher educational attainment leads to greater intellectual flexibility, analytic ability, and broader perspective, and concluded that "the essence of higher class position [higher educational attainment and higher occupational position] is the expectation that one's decisions and actions can be consequential; the essence of lower class position is the belief that one is at the mercy of forces and people beyond one's control, beyond one's understanding."¹ As a result, Kohn found that lower-class parents tended to value conformity to external authority while middle-class parents tended to value the exercise of self-direction. From these elements in Kohn's work, I drew the following hypotheses for the study of parental control in public education: given a relationship between educational attainment and intellectual flexibility, more highly educated parents will prefer greater curricular variety in their children's school programs more often than less well educated parents, including, for example, aesthetic pursuits and the early introduction of advanced scientific and mathematical topics; parents of higher socioeconomic status who are more self-directed due to their own educational experiences and occupational conditions will prefer that their children's instruction be organized around the individual child and that children be encouraged to participate in decisions about the substance of learning and the manner in which it is pursued; and more highly educated and occupationally self-directed parents will tend to make informed choices of their children's schools and will maintain contact with teachers, expecting that their decisions and actions will be consequential.

The Economic Theory of Human Capital and Parental Control

Social psychological concepts of future-time orientation and personal efficacy underlie my predictions relating the socioeconomic characteristics of parents to their dispositions and behavior regarding their children's schooling. The economic theory of investment in human capital supports the additional proposition that differences in children's academic abilities may also influence the value parents assign to their children's schooling, the

¹Kohn, Class and Conformity, p. 189.

preferences they hold for curricular variety and instructional methods, and the control they exercise through school selection and contacts with teachers. According to Schultz, the theory of investment in human capital

... rests on the proposition that there are certain expenditures (sacrifices) that are made deliberately to create productive stocks ... that provide services over future periods. These services consist of producer services revealed in future earnings and of consumer services that accrue to the individual as satisfactions over his lifetime.¹

Investment in human capital, as in physical capital, is likely to be greater when the expected returns on investments are higher.

In the context of schooling, human capital theory supports the proposition that parents will make greater investments of their own time and money to provide academic services to their children who exhibit greater academic capabilities than to their children who are less able.² Parents are more likely to assign a higher value to present and future schooling and to commit their time and money to support additional learning for a child who demonstrates a capacity to readily improve his or her intellectual abilities, expecting that the costs which the parents or child may incur will result in higher returns in the form of learning success and monetary benefits for the child and psychic benefits with possible monetary returns for the household.³ Furthermore, human capital theory suggests that the ability of children may affect their parents' dispositions toward characteristics of present schooling. Parents of more able children are likely to prefer more varied schooling experiences and more individualized treatment than are parents of less able children. Parents are presumed to be aware that the more able child has greater opportunities for applying previous learning to wider varieties of new learning.⁴ This proposition incorporates the further assumption that the

¹Theodore W. Schultz, "Fertility and Economic Values," in Economics of the Family: Parents, Children, and Human Capital, ed. Theodore W. Schultz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 6.

²Similarly, parents would be expected to support athletic programs, out-of-school sports, and sport lessons for the child who is athletically talented.

³Parents in poorer households may expect their children to contribute to the household work and real income as they grow older; see Schultz, "Fertility and Economic Values," pp. 6-7.

⁴See J. Alan Thomas, Resource Allocation in Classrooms (Chicago: Educational Finance and Productivity Center, Department of Education, University of Chicago, 1977), p. 61.

more able child may develop his or her intellectual capacity beyond the basic learning skills in the most efficient manner if materials and methods are prescribed which relate to the child's particular areas of interest and aptitude. Finally, since the child's current ability level may be a function of previous investments by parents in the form of time and materials provided at home,¹ parents may be expected to press for a level of classroom resources for the child which is consistent with their own previous investments; if higher previous investments are embodied in the present capabilities of the more able child, that child's parents may express a strong preference for concentrations of teacher attention and material resources in the child's classroom. And parents may pursue these interests by actively selecting, monitoring, and influencing the schooling of their most capable children.

A Hypothetical Model of Parental Control

The conceptual framework which I have developed from social psychological and economic theory supports a hypothetical model of parental control in public education composed of three interrelated sets of factors: background characteristics of parents and children (household socioeconomic status and child's academic ability); parental dispositions toward their children's schooling (value assigned to future schooling and preferences for current features); and parental control behaviors (the exercise of choice of school and exertion of influence on the classroom). Figure 1 pictures the model in diagrammatic form.

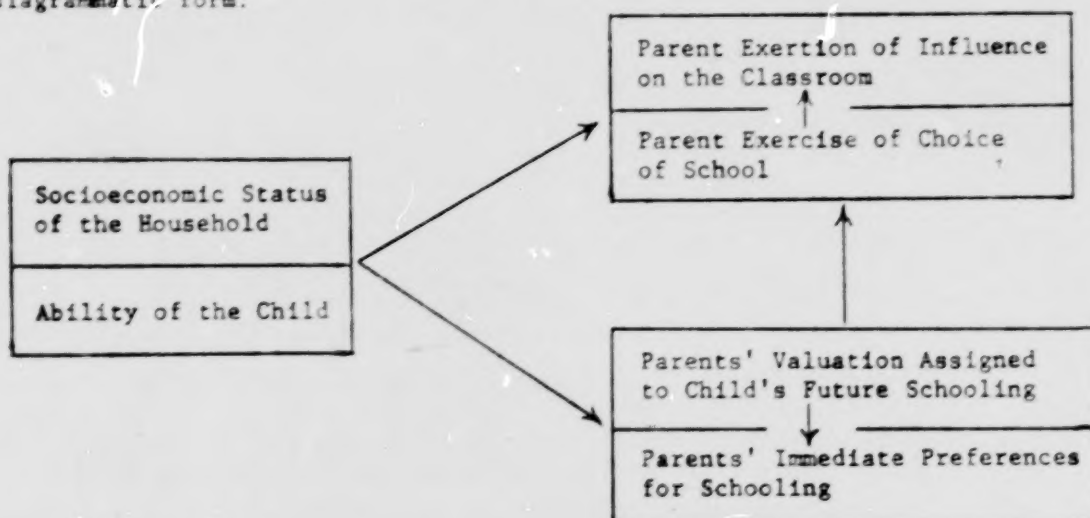


Figure 1. Hypothetical model of parental control in public education.

¹See Arleen Leibowitz, "Investments in Children," *Journal of Political Economy* 82 (March/April 1974):S111-S131.

A Methodology for the Study of Parental Control

The nature of the problem which I addressed in my research question and the conceptual framework I employed to derive testable hypotheses set the conditions for the empirical phase of this study. My interest in the exercise of parental control in public education required that data be collected in public school districts. Predictors of variation in parental dispositions and behavior based on socioeconomic status and the academic abilities of children determined that I have access to information about parents and children and that my sample should include parents of varying socioeconomic background and children of varying abilities. Furthermore, since parents may have their greatest separable impact on their children's schooling in the earlier years, whereas children tend to make decisions about their school programs with increasing frequency as they grow older, I chose families for my study which had children in elementary schools. In this section I discuss all of these factors and their ramifications by describing the sampling procedures, data collection, and methods of analysis involved in the empirical portion of this study.

The Sample

Data which met the conditions prescribed by the basic questions and conceptual framework of this study were collected from a sample of households and classrooms included in the second phase (1979) of the project, "Resource Allocation in Classrooms and Homes," conducted at the Educational Finance and Productivity Center at the University of Chicago.¹ A total of 153 households was generated from a sample of public suburban and urban elementary schools in districts stratified according to median family income and average per-pupil expenditure.

My sample included fifth-grade children because the research project through which I gathered my data had chosen this grade level for its investigations. The fifth-grade level of schooling matched my sample needs by meeting two conditions required by my conceptualization of the study of parental

¹The supporting grant for this project was from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (NIE-P-79-0081). J. Alan Thomas and Susan S. Stodolsky were Co-Principal Investigators.

control. First, I expected to find greater latitude for parental decision making and involvement at this intermediate level of schooling than in secondary schools where institutional procedures, such as comprehensive tracking into pre-collegiate or vocational programs, and the degree of students' self-determination concerning programs and future orientations may begin to remove parents from frequent opportunities for influencing their children's schooling. Second, I anticipated that children in intermediate grades may exhibit broader ranges in their levels of ability than children in the primary grades; such differences allow for potentially greater differentiation of curricula and instruction among and within schools, differentiation to which parents may be sensitive.

Data Collection

Most of the data for this study were gathered by means of home interviews with parents. In 82 percent of the households, the mother served as the sole respondent; in 13 percent both the mother and father participated; and in 5 percent the father was interviewed alone. In households where both parents were present for the interview the mother's responses were used in the analysis if the parents disagreed on any item. This procedure allows for the greatest possible consistency in the source of data.

Trained interviewers followed a structured questionnaire to obtain demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral information about parents. Standardized tests of reading comprehension were administered to the fifth-grade children in the study to gather information on their academic abilities.

Identification and Specification of the Variables

The conceptual model which this study is designed to test is based on seven variables. These variables divide into the following groupings: background characteristics of parents and children, parents' valuation and preferences related to their children's schooling, and parents' behaviors in selecting and influencing their children's schooling.

Background Characteristics

Socioeconomic Status of the Household

In this study I used data on the mother's and father's highest levels

of schooling (or the schooling of surrogate parents) as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status. I excluded income and occupational prestige because, consistent with most studies employing socioeconomic measures, education was strongly correlated with these status variables.¹ Furthermore, of the three commonly used dimensions of socioeconomic status, parents' education is the most proximate characteristic on which to test this study's hypotheses relating parents' dispositions and behaviors to the provision of their children's schooling. I included the education of both parents in constructing the variable since I assume that mothers and fathers share in the decision making and investments of time and money which are involved in their children's schooling.

Interviewers asked respondents to list the highest level of schooling completed by each parent in the household. For analysis of the relationship of this measure to other variables, households were grouped into three categories, "low," "middle," and "high" levels of parent education. Parents in low education households have twelve years of schooling or less. In middle education households, one or both parents have some post-secondary schooling, but neither has a four-year college degree. In high education households, one or both parents have at least a four-year college degree.

Ability of the Child

Because reading ability is essential to the development of learning in virtually all areas of content in the school program, I selected the children's scores on the reading comprehension subsection of the Science Research Associates battery of achievement tests as a proxy for general ability. The fifth-grade children in my sample were grouped for analysis according to the grade equivalency of their raw scores on the test. Children categorized as "poor" readers had scores with grade equivalencies less than fourth grade (less than 4.0). Those whom I labelled as "grade-level" readers had grade-equivalent scores ranging from the fourth grade through the first level of the seventh grade (4.0 through 7.0). "Very good" readers had scores above the base level for seventh grade (7.1 or higher).

¹In my sample, mother's and father's educational attainment have zero order correlations with father's occupational prestige of .60 and .78, respectively.

Parents' Valuations and Preferences
Related to Schooling

This set of variables is selected and constructed to measure parents' dispositions with respect to their children's present and future schooling.

Parents' Valuation of Schooling

I argue that a good predictor of the general value parents assign to schooling in the child's life is the schooling level parents expect their child to attain. Higher levels of expected attainment may indicate that parents will have positive dispositions toward present and future investments in schooling.

During the home interview parents in my sample were asked to specify, from a list of choices, the level of schooling they expected their fifth-grade child to complete. The list included high school, two years of college or trade school, four years of college, and graduate level studies. For analysis, I dichotomized the sample between those households in which the child was expected to complete two years of college or less and those in which the child was expected to attend at least four years of college.

Parents' Preferences for Certain Features
in their Children's Current Schooling

To particularize parents' dispositions toward specific features of their children's fifth-grade schooling, I selected two areas in curriculum and instruction which are central in school programs. These are the varieties of non-standard subjects parents deemed appropriate for inclusion in their child's schooling and the modes of instructional grouping they thought best for the child.

Preferences for Curricular Variety. Fifth-grade classrooms differ very little in their basic curricular programs for children. Most offer studies in elements of language, arithmetic, social studies, science, and physical education. While the specific content, instructional approach, and teaching effectiveness may vary from one classroom to another, the majority of fifth-grade children are engaged for some regular part of each day in these studies. Since schools may differ more in their inclusion of vocal music, instrumental music, art, and foreign languages, I chose to assess variations among parents in their preferences regarding these less traditional subjects in the child's program.

Parents were asked to select a point of view which would best reflect their judgment concerning the appropriateness of each subject in their fifth-grade child's curriculum. The selections available to parents were equivalent to "strongly favoring," "mildly favoring," "mildly opposing," "strongly opposing," or "standing neutral on" the inclusion of each of the subjects, vocal and instrumental music, art, and foreign languages. For the analysis, households were grouped into two categories labelled "less variety" preferred and "more variety" preferred. The categorization was based on two criteria. Households classified as preferring more curricular variety did not oppose the inclusion of any of the four subjects and strongly favored at least two of the four. Households preferring less curricular variety opposed the inclusion of one or more subjects and were strongly in favor of no more than one subject.

Preferences for Instructional Grouping. With a second preference measure I attempted to gauge parents' perceptions of the most advantageous instructional arrangements for their fifth-grade child. I hypothesized that parents may differ in the extent to which they identify some form of individualized treatment of the child as a desired mode of instruction. Interviewers presented parents with descriptions of four modes of instructional organization: two were focussed directly on the individual child (one allowing for teacher-prescribed individualization, the second allowing for student participation in setting the goals and means of learning); the third allowed for the division of the whole class into subsets of children for instructional purposes; and the fourth treated the entire classroom of children as a unit for instruction. Parents were asked to select any single mode or combination of modes

which they thought would best serve their child. Two different classifications were made of parents' responses, one with three levels and a second with two levels. The three-level categorization differentiates among households preferring (1) only individualized arrangements, (2) only whole group instruction, and (3) small group arrangements with or without some combination of the other modes. The dichotomized classification divides the sample according to preferences for "smaller group" and "larger group" instruction. The former category includes the households which prefer only individualized modes or combinations of modes exclusive of whole group instruction. The category labelled "larger group" includes all other households which listed whole group instruction as the single preference or in combination with other arrangements.

Parents' Behavior in Selecting and Influencing Their Children's Schooling

The behavior variables which this study examines are the locational choices of households and the responses of parents to opportunities for contacting their child's teachers. Both activities are intended to differentiate among households in the extent to which parents invest in their children's schooling and exercise control over it.

The Role of Schools in the Residential Location of Families

Parents were asked if any characteristics of their present school or district influenced their decisions to move to the current residential location or remain there. Immediate responses were recorded. Negative responses and generalized positive responses were then probed with the suggestion that some families move or stay because of the general reputation of the schools or for specific attributes about which they have knowledge. In this probe interviewers were instructed to list the general reputation of the elementary school, its class sizes, curricular program, and the reputation of the receiving high school as examples. Responses to such probes were also recorded. Finally, interviewers asked the parents who listed the general reputation or specific attributes of the school or district as inducing their moving or staying to cite their sources of information. In all cases parents were able to designate particular persons from whom they gained their knowledge of the schools.

For the analysis of this variable, households were categorized in two ways. The first classification scheme allows for three groupings, including those households which did not move or stay because of schools, those which were influenced by the general reputation of their present schools, and those in which parents listed one or more specific attributes. The second classification scheme dichotomizes the sample between the first category above, that is, those households which did not take schools into account, and the second and third categories, in which some aspect of the schools was included in locational decision making, combined.

Parents' Contacts with Teachers

To measure the frequency and content of parents' contacts with school personnel, interviewers charted the timing of any contacts, in person, by phone, or by written correspondence, between either parent and the child's teachers. For each contact, parents were asked to describe the person who initiated the contact, the purposes and topic of discussion, and the outcome.

Only information on contacts which occurred from the beginning of the 1979-80 school year through the month of January 1980 were used in the scoring of this variable. Two categories, "low" and "high" activity, were created on the basis of two criteria: the number of contacts and the degree of parent initiation either in arranging contacts or in seeking or transmitting information relevant to the child's academic program and performance. Initiation of the latter sort is meant to account for those parents who brought their own "agendas" to conversations with teachers, regardless of who had originally planned for the contacts. Parents who were high initiators of this type reported that they engaged in contacts with specific queries, not just to participate in an "open house" audience; such parents tended to ask for details about their children's academic performance, to ask how they might help the child with schoolwork at home, and to request specific information about the content, objectives, and expectations associated with one or another curricular subject.

Households were placed in the "low" activity category if they reported three or fewer contacts with no self-initiation in either arranging the contacts or in structuring the exchange of information during the contacts. Parents in the "high" activity category reported three or more contacts with evidence of one or both forms of self-initiation.

On the basis of the specification of variables described in this section, the hypothetical model presented in figure 1 on page 9 can be cast in its empirical form as pictured in figure 2 below.

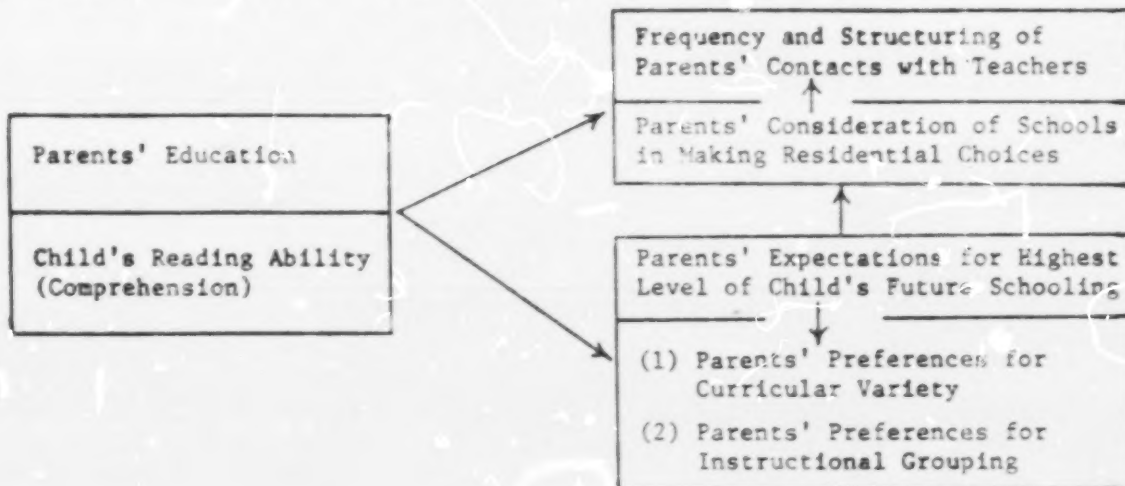


Figure 2. Empirical model of parental control in public schooling.

Methods of Statistical Analysis

I treated all the measures in this study as ordered variables and categorized them as described in the preceding section. At a first level of analysis I cross-classified the variables in pairs and used the chi-square test of association to determine whether or not the frequencies observed in the data were significantly different from those expected under the assumption that the variables are statistically independent. Only those pairs of variables for which chi squares were large enough to meet a significance level of .05 were retained for further analysis.

Whenever two variables were significantly dependent on each other and one or both were also dependent on a third variable, a second level of analysis was undertaken. Under these circumstances I employed a second chi-square test in which the relationship between the original variables was controlled on the third variable under the assumption of conditional independence. Again, I interpreted chi squares which met the .05 level of significance as evidence that the original two variables were statistically dependent.

I adopted the .05 level of probability as a criterion of significance since the sample in this study is relatively small (approximately 150 cases).

and since small samples must exhibit very strong relationships to indicate significant dependence between variables at any commonly accepted level of probability.¹ Further, in the three-variable contingency analysis observations were corrected for continuity whenever the expected frequency in any cell was less than ten.²

Results of the Analysis

In this section I report the outcomes of the cross-classification (chi-square) analyses. The distributional frequencies for households in the categories within each variable are reported in table 2 on the following page. I divided the analysis of data into two parts. In the first I examined the factors which were related to parental exercise of choice, or the degree to which parents took account of schools when they located their family residence. In the second part I report the results of the analysis of parents' contacts with teachers.

The Role of Schools in the Residential Location of Families

Among the several factors which I predicted would relate to differences in locational decision making relative to schools, the educational background of parents carried the strongest single association (see table). The higher

TABLE 1

PARENTS' EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN LOCATION

PARENTS' EDUCATION		SCHOOL/LOCATION		Total
		No	Yes	
Low	No.	(24)	(16)	(40)
	%	60.0	40.0	27.0
Middle	No.	(25)	(25)	(50)
	%	50.0	50.0	33.8
High	No.	(13)	(45)	(58)
	%	22.4	77.6	39.2
Total	No.	(62)	(86)	(148)
	%	41.9	58.1	100.0

15.778 chi squares df=2 probability=.0004

¹See Herbert M. Blalock, Jr., Social Statistics, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 291-92.

²Ibid., pp. 285-86.

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLDS BY CATEGORIES
IN EACH VARIABLE^a

BACKGROUND VARIABLES

Parents' Education^b

low	40 cases	27% of the sample
middle	50	34
high	58	39

Child's Reading Ability^c

poor	30 cases	20% of the sample
grade-level	69	46
very good	51	34

PARENTAL DISPOSITIONS TOWARD SCHOOLING

Expected Future Schooling

less than B.A.	69 cases	45% of the sample
B.A. or more	84	55

Preferences for Curricular Variety

less variety preferred	81 cases	53% of the sample
more variety preferred	72	47

Preferences for Instructional Grouping

(by two categories)

smaller grouping preferred	89 cases	58% of the sample
larger grouping preferred	64	42

(by three categories)

individualized modes preferred	60 cases	39% of the sample
small group modes preferred	58	38
whole class mode preferred	35	23

PARENTAL CONTROL BEHAVIOR

Role of School in Residential Location

no account of schools	66 cases	43% of the sample
location for reputation	57	37
location for specific features	30	20

Frequency and Initiation of Parents' Contacts with Teachers

few, teacher-initiated	72 cases	47% of the sample
more, parent-initiated	81	53

^aFor the description of each variable and categorization scheme, see pages 11-16.^bIn 5 households, the educational attainment of the father was not obtained.^c3 children were unavailable to take the standardized reading comprehension test.

the level of schooling completed by parents, the greater their tendency to make locational decisions based, in part, on their consideration of the schools their children would attend. Furthermore, this relationship between parents' education and locational behavior appears to be bridged by the expectations parents held for their children's future schooling. More highly educated parents tended to expect their children to complete more advanced levels of future schooling, than less well educated parents (χ^2 probability=.0001), and expected future schooling was positively related to parents' locational behavior (χ^2 probability=.0231). When the original association between parents' education and locational behavior was controlled on expectations for future schooling it maintained its overall strength and significance at a .01 level of probability (see table 3). Thus, the parents

TABLE 3
PARENTS' EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN LOCATION
CONTROLLING ON EXPECTED SCHOOLING (N=148)

PARENTS' EDUCATION		EXPECTED SCHOOLING					
		Less than B.A.			More than B.A.		
		SCHOOL/LOCATION			SCHOOL/LOCATION		
		No	Yes	Total	No	Yes	Total
Low	No.	(17)	(9)	(26)	(7)	(7)	(14)
	%	65.4	34.6	38.2	50.0	50.0	17.5
Middle	No.	(13)	(15)	(28)	(12)	(10)	(22)
	%	46.4	53.6	41.2	54.5	45.5	27.5
High	No.	(4)	(10)	(14)	(9)	(35)	(44)
	%	28.6	71.4	20.6	20.5	79.5	55.0
Total	No.	(34)	(34)	(68)	(28)	(52)	(80)
	%	50.0	50.0	100.0	35.0	65.0	100.0
		5.176 chi squares			9.171 chi squares		
		df=2			df=2		
		prob.=.0752			prob.=.0102		

OVERALL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 14.58 DF=4 PROBABILITY < .01

who made active selections of their children's schooling were more highly educated and expected their children to complete higher levels of advanced schooling.

The ability level of the child was positively associated with the extent to which parents took schools into account in locating their residence but to a significantly lesser degree than parents' education (χ^2 probability=.1410). The analyses suggest that parents of more capable children located for schools more often than parents of less able children. In this relationship parental preferences for instructional grouping appear to play a linking function. Child's ability had the strongest and most significant (though curvilinear) relationship with instructional preferences; parents preferred more individualized instruction for their least and most capable children, but preferred larger group instruction for "average" children (see table 4). And instructional preferences, in turn, were

TABLE 4
CHILD'S READING ABILITY AND PREFERENCES FOR
INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING

CHILD'S READING ABILITY		PREFERRED GROUPING		Total
		Smaller	Larger	
Poor	No.	(17)	(13)	(30)
	%	56.7	43.3	20.0
Grade Level	No.	(30)	(39)	(69)
	%	43.5	56.5	46.0
Very Good	No.	(40)	(11)	(51)
	%	78.4	21.6	34.0
Total	No.	(87)	(63)	(150)
	%	58.0	42.0	100.0

14.735 chi squares

df=2

probability=.0006

strongly related to locational behavior when either two categories of preference were cross-classified with three categories of location (χ^2 probability=.0493) or three categories of preference were tabulated with two categories of location (χ^2 probability=.0223). These results suggest that parents of more able children locate most frequently for schools and prefer more individualized modes of instruction for these children.

It is noteworthy that parental preferences for curricular variety, which were most dependent on parents' educational background and somewhat affected

by expected future schooling and child's ability, were unrelated to parents' locational behavior (χ^2 probability=.9847).

In the end, the tendency for parents to take schools into account in locating the family residence appears to depend primarily on the educational background of parents, and this association is linked by parents' expectations for their children's future schooling; the higher the educational attainment of parents, the more advanced schooling they expect their children to attain, and the more they exercise choice over schooling by locating the family residence with schools in mind. Second, there is evidence in the data from this sample of households that parents with more capable children locate because of schools and also want the classroom instruction for these children to be individualized and to allow for student decision making. Figure 3 diagrams the total set of associations which emerged from these analyses.¹

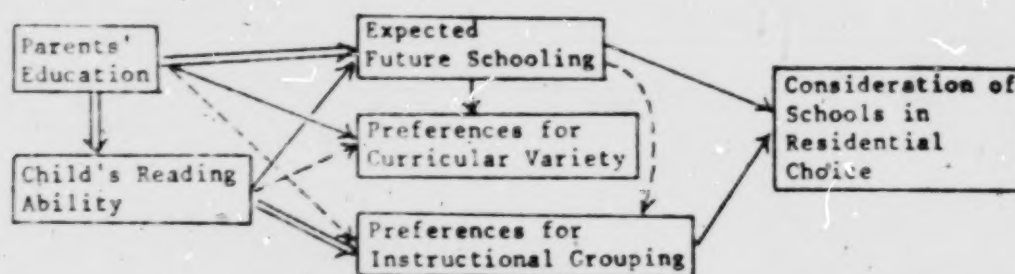


Figure 3. Associations among background characteristics of parents and children, expectations for the child's future schooling, preferences for curricula and instructional grouping, and the role of schools in the residential location of families.

Parents' Exertion of Influence through Contacts with Teachers

The second behavioral variable of interest in my study is the extent to which parents maintain frequent contact with their children's teachers, contact which is parent-initiated and structured. As with locational decision making, I hypothesized that higher levels of contact would be associated with higher parental education, higher academic ability among children, and parental dispositions favoring advanced future schooling, greater curricular

¹ See the Appendix for an explanation of the notational scheme of arrows in figures 3 and 4.

variety, and more individualized and student-participatory modes of instruction. The findings related to this parental control variable parallel, in many respects, the results of the analysis of parental selection of school through choice of family residence. Preferences for curricular variety were not associated with parental influence activity, and the strongest single predictor of frequent and parent-initiated contacts with teachers was parents' educational attainment (see table 5). As with locational behavior,

TABLE 5
PARENTS' EDUCATION AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

PARENTS' EDUCATION		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY		Total
		Lower	Higher	
Low	No.	(27)	(13)	(40)
	%	67.5	32.5	27.0
Middle	No.	(23)	(27)	(50)
	%	46.0	54.0	33.8
High	No.	(20)	(38)	(58)
	%	34.5	65.5	39.2
Total	No.	(70)	(78)	(148)
	%	47.3	52.7	100.0

10.404 chi squares df=2 probability=.0055

parents' education appears to be linked with tendencies to contact teachers through the expectations parents hold for their children's future schooling (expectations and contacts associated at x^2 probability=.0143). However, when the association between parents' education and teacher contacts was controlled on schooling expectations, its level of strength and significance declined (overall x^2 probability > .10), suggesting that schooling expectations are related to parental contacts with teachers in a manner which is somewhat independent of their relationship with parents' education.

A second difference in results between the two behavioral variables has to do with the conjoint associations among child's ability, instructional preferences, and levels of parental contact with teachers. Child's ability was not as strongly related to teacher contacts as to locational behavior (x^2 probabilities, .4422 and .1410, respectively). Yet parental preferences for instructional grouping were associated with contacts at a strong and significant level (see table 6). An analysis of the relationship between

TABLE 6

PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING
AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY

PREFERRED GROUPING		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY		Total
		Lower	Higher	
Smaller	No.	(35)	(53)	(88)
	%	39.8	60.2	57.5
Larger	No.	(37)	(28)	(65)
	%	56.9	43.1	42.5
Total	No.	(72)	(81)	(153)
	%	47.1	52.9	100.0

4.414 chi squares

df=1

probability=.0356

instructional preferences and teacher contacts, controlling on the abilities of children, shows that parents of poorer readers tended to interact with teachers regardless of their instructional preferences, parents of "grade-level" readers were slightly more active when they preferred more individualized instruction and less active when they preferred larger group instruction, and parents of very good readers had significantly high levels of self-initiated contacts with teachers when they preferred more individualized rather than larger group instruction (see table 7). The composite results suggest that under certain conditions parental preferences for instructional grouping have a strong effect on the influence parents exert on classroom teachers through contacts. When parents have very capable children and want classroom resources to be channelled to these children on an individual basis, they tend to be highly involved with their children's teachers. In addition, the analysis of the 26 cases which meet these two conditions reveals that in 22 of the households, one or both parents have a four-year college degree. This configuration of factors supports the conceptual hypotheses underlying this study, namely, that parental dispositions toward their children's schooling (in this case, instructional preferences) may serve to link both background characteristics--the educational level of parents and the abilities of children--to the degree of involvement which parents maintain in the classroom life of their children.

TABLE 7

PARENTS' PREFERENCES FOR INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPING AND LEVELS OF INFLUENCE ACTIVITY
CONTROLLING ON CHILD'S READING ABILITY (N=150)

		CHILD'S READING ABILITY								
		Poor			Grade Level			Very Good		
PREFERRED GROUPING		INFLUENCE ACTIVITY			INFLUENCE ACTIVITY			INFLUENCE ACTIVITY		
		Lower	Higher	Total	Lower	Higher	Total	Lower	Higher	Total
Smaller	No.	(6)	(11)	(17)	(14)	(16)	(30)	(14)	(26)	(40)
	%	35.3	64.7	56.7	46.7	53.3	43.5	35.0	65.0	78.4
Larger	No.	(6)	(7)	(13)	(22)	(17)	(39)	(8)	(3)	(11)
	%	46.2	53.8	43.3	56.4	43.6	56.5	72.7	27.3	21.6
Total	No.	(12)	(18)	(30)	(36)	(33)	(69)	(22)	(29)	(51)
	%	40.0	60.0	100.0	52.2	47.8	100.0	43.1	56.9	100.0
		.491 chi squares df=1 prob.=.4833			.702 chi squares df=1 prob.=.4021			5.004 chi squares df=1 prob.=.0253		

OVERALL MAXIMUM LIKELIHOOD CHI SQUARES: 6.06 DF=3 PROBABILITY > .10

In summary, it appears that the influence activity of parents depends on a variety of factors. While parents' educational background holds the strongest bivariate relationship with levels of contact, the child's ability, expected future schooling, and parental preferences for instructional grouping all play a role. Figure 4 displays the results in graphic form.

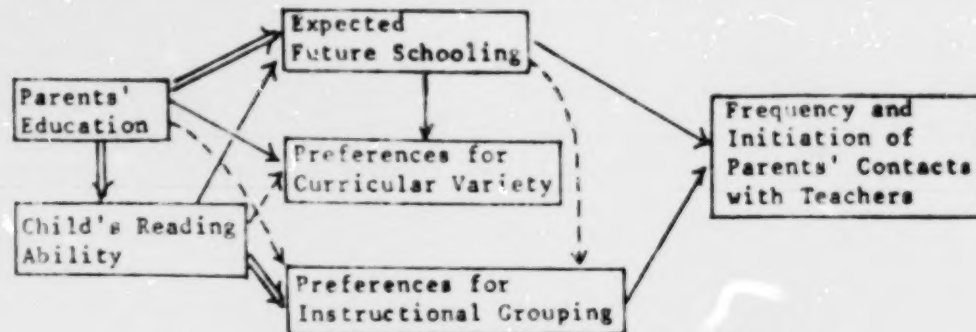


Figure 4. Associations among the background characteristics of parents and children, expectations for the child's future schooling, parental preferences for curricula and instructional grouping, and the influence activity of parents.

Conclusions and Implications

In a recent analysis of communication between citizens and professional administrators in school districts, Tucker and Zeigler draw a conclusion which conforms with the findings of most political studies of the governance of public schools: "The superintendent and other professional administrators consistently dominate the lay school board and public . . . largely because the latter abstain from participation."¹ The only counter-evidence for such a conclusion comes from the analysis of episodic surges of citizen control in the form of electoral defeat of incumbent school board members and the involuntary turn-over of superintendents which often accompany rapid changes in the demographic composition of school districts.² On balance, the most widely held claim is that citizen participation is generally meager and less consequential than administrative influence in determining school policies and practices. The significance of this conclusion is highly dependent on the definition of citizen participation

¹Harvey J. Tucker and L. Harmon Zeigler, Professionals versus the Public: Attitudes, Communication, and Response in School Districts (New York: Longman, 1980), pp. 229-30.

²See, for example, Laurence Iannaccone and Frank W. Lutz, Politics, Power and Policy: The Governing of Local School Districts (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1970).

employed in the typical study of educational politics. Researchers working in this tradition tend to measure participation in terms of the frequency of communication between lay persons, school board members, and central office administrators as well as voter turn-out ^{and electoral conflict in} A district elections and referenda. My research suggests that a different picture emerges when the conceptualization of participation is modified to include the control behaviors of parents as they are expressed in locational decision making to select schools and interactions between parents and teachers. In my sample 57 percent of the households reported that they took either the reputation or specific features of schools into account in deciding whether to move to or remain in a residential location. And 53 percent maintained relatively frequent and self-initiated contact with their children's teachers. Admittedly these findings may be upwardly biased due to the relatively large numbers of more educated parents who agreed to participate in the study, and my research question did not take into account the effect of parental choice and influence on curricular, instructional, or achievement outcomes. Nevertheless, levels of parental participation appear to be significantly higher than one might expect from previous research when involvement is defined to include the "micro-level" activities of individual households.

This research also lends support to the Tiebout hypothesis that households will locate in municipal jurisdictions where they obtain the optimal package of public goods and services which matches their preferences, within the constraint of their income.¹ Less direct attempts to measure the role of schools in residential decision making by analyzing tax capitalization have been hindered by econometric problems and have reported conflicting conclusions as to whether a "public market" exists. However, given that over half of the households in my sample included schools in their calculus of services to be obtained by locating in one or another residential location, this study offers some direct, if only suggestive, data which may validate the Tiebout hypothesis.

A third set of findings relate to the important question of the possible effects of alternative forms of school finance and governance in pre-collegiate

¹Charles M. Tiebout, "A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures," Journal of Political Economy 64 (October 1956):416-24.

schooling. If the rationale for a more competitive system of schooling, less monopolized by public providers and more amenable to parental choice, includes an expectation that financially and politically disadvantaged parents will resemble other parents in their involvement in decision making concerning their children's schooling, this study questions the reasonableness of the more extreme claims.

First, the households in my sample varied considerably in their preferences for curricular and instructional characteristics of schooling for their children, and these dispositions were strongly related to the socioeconomic status of parents. Preferences for curricular variety were associated with the educational background of parents; the higher the parents' own educational attainment, the greater their interest in opportunities for their children to study music, art, and foreign languages. If it turned out that, in a competitive market in schooling, children of more highly educated parents were mainly grouped in schools offering wider curricular variety, the resulting patterns of social segregation might not differ greatly from those which presently exist in public and private schools.¹ Perhaps more important is the finding that no more than a few parents cited the curricular programs of the elementary school as a reason for selecting it for their children, and overall, the curricular preferences of parents showed absolutely no relationship to the exercise of choice in the analysis of these variables. Thus, policy makers might be advised to modify their listings of the factors which parents are likely to apply to their decision choices.

A second significant result in this study concerns the relationship of parents' instructional preferences and their control behavior related to their children's schooling. Households responded with widely varying interests in individualized instruction and instruction which permits children to make learning decisions in the classroom. The abilities of children, along with their parents' educational background, tended to determine instructional preferences, and those parents who desired more individualized and participatory instruction were more likely to choose their children's schools than were those who preferred more traditional, whole-

¹Christopher Jencks et al. make a similar prediction in, Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and School in America (New York: Basic Books, 1972; New York: Harper and Row, Harper Colophon Books, 1973), p. 53.

class instruction; such parents were also likely to make frequent, self-initiated contacts with teachers. These findings may help explicate, to some degree, the less empirical observations of these who relate school and classroom "climate" to the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is located. For example, Bowles and Gintis extrapolated on Kohn's findings of relationships between social class and the orientation of parents toward conformity to authority versus self-direction, to suggest that the nature of the work place of parents is congruent with the nature of the schools their children attend.¹ If parents have little job security and are treated in an arbitrary manner when they are working, the schools their children attend will be chaotic and repressive. The children of parents who have stable but rule-structured and subordinate positions of work will find themselves in schools which allow for little independent decision making. And if parents are in work situations where they exercise independent judgment much of the time, their children will have a larger role in making decisions about what and how they will study and will have more behavioral latitude in the classroom. The overriding implication of the Bowles and Gintis argument is that children are prepared to assume jobs with the same kinds of conformity/self-direction conditions under which their parents work. They do not discuss, however, the mechanisms which may connect school environments to the norms of their parents' work places. My findings suggest that parents who value greater latitude for student decision making in the classroom are the parents who tend to take schools into account in their location decisions and who initiate more frequent contacts with their children's teachers. Thus, middle-class schools may, in Bowles' and Gintis' terms, "employ relatively open systems that favor greater student participation, less direct supervision, and more student electives . . ."² because parents choose schools which exhibit these characteristics and communicate their preferences to school personnel once their children are enrolled. The logical corollary to this proposition, however, is more problematic, given my findings. If inner-city and working-class schools tend to be more authoritarian and rule-oriented, there is little

¹Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Kohn, Class and Conformity.

²Bowles and Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America, p. 132.

evidence in my study that parents (who may be expected to prefer such conditions) actively select and monitor those schools. This quandry introduces other possibilities not addressed in this study. First, schools may develop instructional patterns which are shaped by the orientations of students as much as by the direct intervention of parents. A second possibility is that teachers may be sorted by the hiring practices in school districts or may sort themselves by applying to certain kinds of districts and not others in such a way that their own social class background matches the socioeconomic status of the community in which they teach. While these possibilities are speculative it is probable that the educational environment of the school is influenced by students, parents, and teachers alike. What is particularly interesting is the prospect that in some schools the value orientations of all three parties may be highly congruent and self-reinforcing.

In the end, this study of parental control supports the objections which others have raised about the possible effects of quasi-markets in schooling. There is little evidence to suggest that schools of choice would decrease the social segregation present in today's public and private schools. Unless economically bold and equitable voucher plans were to change the value orientations and behavior of some parents, my findings suggest that those parents who are most likely to take advantage of increased opportunities to influence their children's schooling are parents who, themselves, have attained more advanced levels of education. My findings may sustain the old argument that the best potential intellectual development of some children may require the intervention of social agencies, particularly the schools, in loco parentis, when parents do not or cannot actively exercise their options to control their children's schooling or would do so in such a way as to limit the development of their children's capacities.¹ An alternative approach may involve a broader definition of parents' roles in their children's schooling. For example, parents might be brought into their children's schools and classrooms to assist teachers and observe instructional techniques applicable at home and might be involved in coor-

¹For an interesting presentation of economic arguments for legal sanctions requiring parents to invest optimally in their children or to allow the state to intervene, see Richard A. Posner, Economic Analysis of Law, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 103-104.

minated studies at the school site where they could gain practical skills as well as continue their own academic learning along side their children.

The balance in this equation between parental and professional influence on children's schooling and development will depend on the relative importance which educators place on the controlling interests of parents and the professional capacities of teachers and administrators to diagnose children's needs and potentials and to support the best development of each child. This perplexity will always be a factor in the schooling of children. And better educators may be distinguishable from poorer ones because they acknowledge the dilemmas inherent in the parent-educator partnership and because they choose to play an active role in sponsoring the interests of the child.

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Appendix

Legend to Graphic Notations in Figures 3 and 4

- ⇒ signifies that the variables were associated at a .05 level of statistical probability or better in their bivariate relationship and that this association maintained an overall significance at a .05 level or better when it was controlled on one or more other variables
- signifies that the variables were associated at a .05 level of statistical probability or better in their bivariate relationship but the significance level of that association rose above the .05 level when it was controlled on one or more other variables.
- signifies that the variables were strongly associated but not at a .05 level of statistical probability in their bivariate relationship and that one variable reduced the statistical significance of a relationship between the second variable and a third variable when it was used as a conditional control in the three-way cross-tabulation of all three variables.